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TAGS: [EAGR](#) [EAID](#) [PREL](#) [SENV](#) [SOCI](#) [GR](#)  
SUBJECT: FIRES IN GREECE: AUGUST 24 SITREP

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SUMMARY  
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[1](#)1. (SBU) Over the weekend of August 21-23, over 80 wildfires broke out throughout Greece. The worst of these hit northeast of the greater Athens area, fueled by strong winds and evoking images of Greece's devastating 2007 fire season. In response, Post issued a Warden message. While the worst of the fires near Athens seemed to be contained by Monday morning, several are still burning. While the fire service is cautiously claiming that most are under control, re-ignitions and the weather continue to be concerns. According to the press, 30,000 acres and dozens of residences have burned, but no casualties have been reported. Early on Saturday, PM Karamanlis declared a state of emergency, deployed the Greek military to fight alongside civilian firefighting assets and visited the scene. In addition, Karamanlis requested assistance from EU member states. So far, Italy, France, and Cyprus have answered the call, with some press reports that Turkey and Russia are also sending assistance. The Ambassador has sent a letter to the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Interior offering a firefighting unit from Souda Bay and OFDA resources if needed. Informal communications, however, indicate the GoG may not need the assistance at this time. Press coverage of the fires has been extensive, with many criticizing the GoG's slow response and ineffectiveness. The fires represent yet another crisis major challenge for PM Karamanlis. The political consequences are not clear.

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AUTHORITIES RESPOND TO THE FIRES  
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[1](#)2. (SBU) Over 80 wildfires broke out in Greece over the weekend, including several in northeastern Attica and the islands of Zakynthos, Skyros and Evia. The worst of the wildfires, and those generating the most attention, started on 21 August in the northern suburbs of Athens, forcing thousands to evacuate their homes. No casualties were reported, although the government quickly declared a state of emergency and deployed military assets as fears rose that the fires would be similar to those in the summer of 2007 when 70 people perished. The fires started in the northern suburb of Grammatiko on 21 August, and continued through 24 August. According to multiple press reports, about 2,000 fire-fighters, including from neighboring municipalities, and 340 troops participated in the effort to suppress the fires. Additionally, 500 vehicles, 130 fire engines, 30 water tankers, 26 military vehicles, and 20 aircraft supported the fire-fighting effort.

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AMERICAN CITIZENS AND PROPERTY NOT HARMED  
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[1](#)3. (SBU) Post has not received any reports of injured American citizens or loss of American citizens' property due to the fires. Embassy released a warden message to all American citizens registered with Embassy Athens and Consulate General Thessaloniki.

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RESPONSE FROM OTHER COUNTRIES  
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14. (SBU) According to press reports over the weekend, France and Italy each provided two firefighting aircraft, and Cyprus sent a small firefighting contingent and fire plane to aid the Greek effort. Press reports today indicated that Turkey and Russia have also offered to send aircraft.

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USG ASSISTANCE  
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15. (SBU) The Ambassador has sent a letter to Foreign Minister Bakoyannis and Interior Minister Pavlopoulos offering USG assistance. Specifically, in consultation with EUCOM and the Commander of Souda Bay, the Embassy has offered a ground fire fighting unit and team from Souda Bay, including one water cannon truck with a 3,000 gallon tank, a command and control vehicle, and a fire engine. Together with the six trained personnel, it can operate as an independent firefighting unit or it can be integrated into other efforts. In addition, Post has been in touch with USAID's Office of Disaster Assistance in Hungary, to see what types of emergency humanitarian or disaster assistance is available. While the Ambassador has not yet chosen to exercise his COM authority to declare a disaster, thereby triggering OFDA assistance, Post has indicated to the GoG that we stand ready to provide this type of assistance based upon the GoG's evolving needs. Post has some informal feedback from the GoG that it

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has enough ground firefighting forces at this time.

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LOCAL PRESS CRITICAL OF GOVERNMENT  
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16. (SBU) Press coverage of the fires has been extensive, with most television stations showing continuous coverage. The press has focused on the actual fires, the GoG's response, and the ecological consequences. Over the course of the weekend, as the fires worsened and scenes depicted home owners and citizens confronting the blazes with buckets and hoses rather than Greek firefighters, criticism of the government's handling of the fires increased. Many voices - opposition and ruling party alike - called the government's response slow and ineffective, echoing similar criticisms made during the 2007 fires. A growing theme in news coverage has been that the fire service was slow to respond and its efforts were poorly coordinated. While a cause of the fires is not yet known, some press is focused on arsonists, urging the GoG to deal with this issue.

17. (SBU) The press is speculating that a Cabinet re-shuffle rumored to be in the offing for this fall will be put off for a short time at least. Other analysts suggest that the fires may change the political dynamic in ways that could affect the timing of the next election -- expected by many to occur in March 2010 if not before -- but it is unclear at present exactly how the ramifications will play out in the political scene.

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COMMENT  
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18. (SBU) PM Karamanlis has appeared to apply a number of lessons learned from the fires in 2007. Declaring a state of national emergency and deploying military assets are two moves he was accused of waiting too long to take at that time. Karamanlis additionally has toured the scene and appeared on television, working to coordinate the response to the fires. Thus far, however, the steps it has taken have not satisfied the critics, who are focused on the GoG's slow response and ineffectiveness. While it is too early to tell the full political impact of the fires, it can only weaken an already precarious situation for the Karamanlis government.  
SPECKHARD